

Between New Sensibility and Transgression: Slovenian Alternative Artistic Practices – OHO and NSK

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The article conducts a comparative discussion on the strategic poetic and political similarities/differences between the respective contexts of neo-avant-garde and retro-avant-garde practices in relation to aesthetic, artistic, and cultural revolutions. I juxtapose two revolutionary potentials and effects of their actualisation: the utopias and projections of the international revolution relating to the “new sensibility” and the unity of “art and life” of 1968, and several projects and practices that undermine totalitarian systems, from punk cynicism to the national revolutions of 1989 that overthrew real socialism in the Eastern and Central Europe. In my comparative discussion I focus on two specific cases in Slovenian art and alternative cultures, highlighting the position of “experimental poetry,” “new sensibility,” and “conceptual art” of the OHO group, active between 1966 and 1971, and the position of “political cynicism” and “retro-avant-garde art” in the Neue Slowenische Kunst movement founded in 1984.

Keywords: art and society / Slovenian art / neo-avant-garde / post-avant-garde / retro-avant-garde / conceptual art / politics / revolution / OHO / Neue Slowenische Kunst

Ontology of late revolutionary practices, 1968–1989

In the 1960s, the left and liberal revolutionary potentials within the student and youth movements came into confrontation; they pursued either a “new sensibility” (Marcuse 23–24) or a “radical change in everyday life” in both developed and real socialist societies. The student and youth movement and its new leftist, spiritually exotic, and emancipatory political platforms were directed against the bureaucratization

and technocratization in the capitalist Cold War societies of France, Germany, and the US. In the real-socialist societies of the East, the movement resisted post-revolutionary bureaucratization and statism that deviated from the original revolutionary utopias. The atmosphere of May 1968 was *conceived* under the historical conditions of the alienated high modernism of the late 1950s and, later, in the emancipatory and revolutionary 1960s, when a confrontation between the dominant centres and margins of modernity took place in a field where elite art competed with popular art and culture. It should not be forgotten that at that time popular culture—as the culture of the working class and marginal groups—had a subversive character (Hall and Jefferson 189). Changes in the status of the work of art or the artist are therefore not autonomous transformations in the field of art, but represent *events* with more far-reaching, i.e. political, consequences for culture and society as well as for the metaphysics of the individual and collective human being.

For example, instead of thinking of May 1968 in terms of confrontations, Antonio Negri refers to the joy of the *new humanity* and thus also of a *new humanism*:

The revolutionary movement had its pauses, its moments of reflection and joy. In the end, when we think about it, May 1968 was not about exalting confrontations and struggle; that's still its "modern" aspect. Nineteen sixty-eight was something else completely—the pleasure of discovering a new humanity, a deep joy in ourselves and around us, of realizing that elements of expression, imagination, and life can exist together. We went from utopia to a nonutopian concretization of the real. What we were doing, what we wanted to do, and what we had started doing contained a novel risk, a new world. (Lotringer and Negri)

The revolutions on the eve of 1989 and in its wake took place mainly because the project of state socialism was coming to an end, accompanied by the collapse of the late-socialist USSR. These revolutionary events resulted from the rivalry between the US and the USSR, including economic, diplomatic, and military antagonisms. These events were exacerbated by economic crises which led to the economic collapse of real socialism, nationalist antagonisms within multi-ethnic states, and the peaceful or violent political struggles they waged during the establishment of nation states on the ruins of socialist federations such as the USSR, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. The disintegrating process of these modern real-socialist federations, which entailed the privatization of

their means of production, markets, and communication, was labelled “the transition.” Paradoxically, this “transition” serves to denote the social, economic, and cultural transformation of modern socialist states and cultures into neoliberal societies with a common global structure and specific ethno-national identifications.

I propose to identify the OHO group as a symptom of the “new sensibility” and the artistic search for a *third alternative path* between the respective social formats of liberal capitalism and real or self-managed socialism. Accordingly, the NSK movement can be interpreted as a symptom of the decline of the Cold War division of the world, but also as a cynical challenge by artists to the historical and current political implications of the nation, capital, and state.

The OHO group: *Permanent revolutions* between art and modalities of life (1966 and 1971)

The prehistory of the OHO group took place mainly in Kranj between 1962 and 1965. In this small Upper Carniolan town, Marko Pogačnik and Iztok Geister Plamen initiated their research and experimental art practices. The OHO group was active between 1966 and 1971 in Kranj and Ljubljana (Brejc, *OHO* 12–34; Zabel 18–136; Šuvaković 9–135). In 1971, some members of the OHO group, together with their partners or friends, founded the Šempas Commune, in which living art practices of its members temporarily replaced their earlier work in the field of conceptual art.

The movement of *OHO – Katalog* included poetic, artistic, activist, theoretical, and cultural practices that were carried out around 1968 in Ljubljana. It brought together artists and poets Iztok Geister, Marko Pogačnik, Milenko Matanović, the Šalamun brothers, Franci Zagoričnik, Matjaž Hanžek, Naško Križnar, Marko Švabič, and Vojin Kovač-Chubby with the art theorist Taras Kermauner and the philosophers and cultural theorists Braco Rotar, Rastko Močnik, and Slavoj Žižek. Their main forum was the journal *Problemi*, founded in 1962 in Ljubljana. *Problemi* and the Maribor Znamenja series of books helped to establish links between authors and artists from the Slovenian and Yugoslav artistic, theoretical, and intellectual scene who were critical of the moderate modernism of the socialist self-management society prevailing at the time; in fact, they acted as agents of an artistic, cultural, and theoretical subversion of the mainstream, both locally, in Yugoslavia, and internationally.

The artworks of the OHO group and the Katalog movement were often described as “reistic.” Reism was a movement that emerged from a philosophical, artistic, and theoretical critique of the *humanist world view*; more precisely, its presentations of the phenomenality of the world were implemented with a radical and reductivist-structural return to the *objects themselves* (Kermauner 61). The return to the *object itself* means that objects and aspects of their objectness are represented literally, that is, emphasising aspects of their specific media of artistic expression: the lines of a drawing, the letters in a text, and so on.

In a crucial programmatic text published in *Tribuna* (23 November 1966) from the beginning of the OHO “revolution,” Pogačnik and Iztok Geister Plamen wrote:

Objects are objective. We approach the objectivity of the object in such a way that we accept the object as it is. But what is an object like? The first thing we notice is that the object is silent. But an object has something to offer! In a word, we lure an inaudible voice out of an object. The speech pronounces this voice designated by a word. Here speech meets music, which is the audible voice of an object. (qtd. in Brejc, *OHO* 12)¹

The self-reflexive character of the reistic works is revealed through the reistic tautology, i.e., the phenomenality of the object itself, without any other potential extensions (expressive, metaphorical, symbolic, or theoretical). In a broader theoretical sense, reism represented the completion of Heideggerian thought in Slovenian culture and its structuralist turn.

Philosophically, this period experienced an immanent critique of existentialism and the humanist understanding of a centred, consistent, and complete modern subject, which led to a critique of moderate socialist modernism. The result was a radical combination of focus on the object, similar to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with Heidegger’s notion of care, Barthes’ interest in writing, and last but not least, the minimalism of Beckett’s theatre of absurd, American objectivist poetry, Pop Art and visual minimalism, which were emerging at the time. The term *objekt* (‘object’) coincided with the term *artikel* (‘article, commodity’). While the *objekt* denoted the thing in the philosophical sense, the *artikel* denoted an object that was produced,

¹ “Stvari so stvarne. Stvarnosti stvari se približamo tako, da stvar sprejmemo tako, kot je. Kako pa stvar je? Stvar, to najprej opazimo, je tiho. Toda stvar ima kaj dati! Z besedo izrabimo neslišen glas stvari. Govor ta glas, označen z besedo, izreče. Tukaj se govor sreča z glasbo, ki je slišen glas stvari.”

duplicated, exchanged, and offered to mass consumption in a real or imagined society of abundance.

OHO's early work was close to the Slovenian literary movement called Ludism. In Ludism, objects, texts, or actions (happenings) belong to the domain of play (Slovenian *igra*). The play opens the space for a subject to be liberated in a revolutionary way from the regulations imposed by utilitarian labour, i.e., the production, exchange, and consumption of social goods, relationships and values. Furthermore, the play becomes an *agent* of the postformalist turn from the work of art (art *qua* work) to the artistic process (art *qua* process). At the same time, the play is also an existentialist gesture that deals with the "essence" (Slovenian *bistvo*) of literature, painting, theatre, and life itself. Finally, the play is an expression of counter-cultural hippie behaviour and of being in the real world. By making life a game (or vice versa), young artists could escape the reduction to the functions of the utilitarian world of adults and their institutional demands in real or self-managed socialism and consumer capitalism.

The later work of the OHO group—to which Pogačnik, Matanović, Andraž Šalamun, Tomaž Šalamun and Nez contributed—was related to the elaboration of post-Duchampian practices and artistic movements such as Arte Povera and Anti-Form Art as well as Conceptual Art. They developed strategies that transform the artistic object from an article, item (*artikel*) into a spatial installation and a spatio-temporal event. Between 1967 and 1969, the OHO group produced a series of artworks that explored literal objects, materials, and their relationships in the spirit of post-Duchampian ready-mades and para-ready-mades, similar to examples of Pop Art commercial objects, Minimal Art specific objects, or the Process Art transformation of materials and human behaviour: Pogačnik's plaster casts entitled *Steklenice* (Bottles) from 1967; *Triglav*, a 1968 happening performed by David Nez, Milenko Matanović, and Drago Dellabernardina; Tomaž Šalamun's installation *Seno, koruzovina, opeke* (A Bale of Hay, Corn, and Bricks, 1969); *Streha* (Roof), Nez's installation from 1969.² OHO's handling of objects and materials of artistic and non-artistic origin was determined on the one hand by the general postulates of Arte Povera and Anti-Form Art, and on the other hand by a specific Reistic doctrine. Their approach to

² Among the most important exhibitions of the OHO group are *Pradedje* (Great-Grandfathers), Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1969; an exhibition in Atelje 69 – Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1969; *Prapradedje* (Great-Great-Grandfathers), Youth Forum Gallery, Novi Sad, 1969; an exhibition in the Youth Centre Gallery, Belgrade, 1969.

materials was based on a non-literal translation of phenomenological and existentialist concepts into the field of discursive and poetic structural models. It can be concluded from this that OHO reductionism, from the reistic return to “things themselves” to the conceptualist “dematerialisation of the artistic object,” corresponded to the literary and theatrical Minimalism of the late 1950s and 1960s, while it referred to American sculptural Minimalism (as an immanent critique of formalism), thus approaching post-minimalist tendencies of the late 1960s.

In 1970, the members of the OHO group developed a specific kind of conceptual art. Their conceptualist work was predominantly self-reflexive, i.e., self-analytical and introspective. This applied to relatively simple techniques of recording, conceptualising, and diagrammatically representing their perception of the world and the relationships within the group. In addition, self-reflection entered their verbalisation—linguistic representation—of physical or behavioural actions. In its later development, self-reflective explorations examined the various possibilities for action and their recording.

Conceptual diagrammatic structures replaced the production of objects and media experiments with books or periodicals, installations and processes. The group even conceived a special administrative form of presenting their self-reflexive artistic practice. On an A4 sheet of paper, they would provide a text or diagram that emphasised the phenomenal and conceptual order of the work. Documentary photographs recall spatio-temporal interventions and behavioural events. Their conceptual works have been called “projects” to refer to possible events or conditions that are not necessarily realised in the end.

A project or concept is thus a textual-diagrammatic representation of a possible physical phenomenality. It is an elementary conceptual representation through which a physical phenomenon gives way to a discursive structure that refers to this phenomenon. Such a strategy involves a “naïve” dematerialization of an artistic object. A potential or actual artistic object is replaced by a discursive description, specification, or draft, whereby the situation of direct perception is replaced by a mediated situation that is open to reading and conceptual reconstruction. Artistic works of this kind correspond to the general self-reflexive model of an artistic work about artistic work. In place of the word *delo* (‘work of art’) in the sense of a complete and sensually representable work, there is *projekt* (‘a project’) or *delo* (work as ‘labor’), which suggests the meanings of ‘something that is being worked on, something that has been worked on, something that is in the middle of being performed and conceptualized.’

With its productions, the OHO group embodied the opposition (OHO 225–226; 234–235) both to the existing modernist-existentialist painting of so-called *temni modernizem* (dark modernism; Brejc, *Temni* 35–39) and to the more commercialized production of socialist modernism from the Ljubljana school of graphic art to late Art Informel and socialist abstract monumental sculpture.

The act of OHO's radical departure from experimentalism in poetry and art and from pro-hippie and new left activism took place on 11 April 1971, when its members, together with partners and friends, moved to the village of Šempas near Nova Gorica (Brejc, "Obitelj" 19–20). At that time, they radicalized the "new sensibility" by moving it from the alternative urban youth culture to the alternative of a *third way* (see Pogačnik), i.e., introducing a social situation beyond the art field—life in a commune. The Šempas family represented a micro- and peaceful revolution of a utopian ecological-existential idealism that tried to invent an alternative way of living and performing sociality within the existing real or self-managed socialism. The idea was not to resist, but to offer the construction of otherness.

Neue Slowenische Kunst: A cynical phenomenology of power and the state between art and life modalities (1984–)

Neue Slowenische Kunst or NSK is a movement (Arns 13–82), i.e., a dynamic aggregate of alternative artistic groups and alternative institutions that has been active in Slovenia since the early 1980s. The world of political conflicts, economic crises, state and para-state conspiracies forms an important background for the artists and agents of the NSK movement. They use the actual social antagonisms as a means, i.e., "post-medium," to convey their intentions. From this perspective, the NSK movement appears as a simulacrum of the political traumas of the 20th century and as a critical artistic projection of the contradictions of the current age of crises and confrontations between life forms in territorialized states and de-territorialized flexible (infra-)structures of economic and political power.

As an artistic movement, NSK would not be possible in Eastern Europe and during the period of total control, surveillance, and punishment (i.e., real socialism with a brutal Stalinist-Communist face), but it could emerge in the "softer" or "liberal" version of real socialism as embodied in Yugoslav self-management, or in so-called Communism with a human face (cf. Britovšek et al. 113–197; Erjavec, "Neue" 137–

143). The NSK movement was able to appropriate and undermine dominant *icons* of totalitarianism precisely in the reformist milieu, which sought a way away from socialism and beyond. This was possible because such a milieu pursued an internal post-political deconstruction of the traumatic taboos of Stalinism instead of confronting and rejecting the socialist system in the way desired by right-wing and traditionalist Eastern European dissidents (e.g., Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) or, on the other hand, by radical Western neo-avant-gardists (e.g., Fluxus, Situationism, Actionism, New Tendencies, Conceptual Art) inspired by the utopian ideas of permanent social progress and liberal emancipation. Nevertheless, NSK also opposed the dominant line of Western *soft* and *eclectic* postmodern art, ranging from transavantgarde and neo-expressionism to anachronism, or Bad Painting: “The group IRWIN acted, in fact, in diametrical opposition to postmodern manifestations” (Iles, n. pag.).

In its artistic, cultural, and social interventions, NSK differed from the art of the Russian Perestroika period, i.e., the trend building on the fascination with the affinities and differences between Soviet Socialist Realism and North American Pop Art. NSK also differed significantly from Chinese “Cynical Realism,” Polish “Blasphemous Art,” and Central Asian “Conceptualism” in its broad field, which includes everyday culture, retro music, theatre, video productions, design, philosophy, theory, and various forms of cultural activism. The NSK group rejected the modernist optimistic and utopian platforms of ideal creative disciplines and cultural cohesion. The critique of “Enlightenment” idealism and rationalism was at the heart of the NSK movement. The music group Laibach was founded in 1980 in the mining town of Trbovlje, while the visual arts group IRWIN started in 1983 in Ljubljana. They initially participated in Ljubljana’s alternative post-punk scene, which was organized around actions in clubs, graffiti art, student magazines, punk, new wave, electronic music, and underground radicalism (Erjavec and Gržinić et al. 88–107). In the 1980s they became recognized protagonists of Slovenian alternative culture, together with the band Borghesia, the club Disco FV, Ana Monroe Theatre, the weekly newspaper *Mladina*, and the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis.

In this context, NSK aimed to politicize the everyday and undermine the political canon. Thus, the group Laibach expressed its attitude to politics in ambiguous ways, including the following prominent self-referential statements: “Politics is the highest and most comprehensive art, and we who create contemporary Slovenian art consider ourselves politicians” (NSK 23) and: “He who has material power has spiritual

power, and all art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of that very manipulation” (NSK 23). The cultural, artistic, and implicitly theoretical consequences of NSK practices were directed towards a complex and non-linear subversion of the idealized scheme of modernist art’s autonomy; instead, the NSK movement sought to put art back at the center of people’s dramatic struggle for life and their everyday derailments.

Retro-Avant-Garde or Retro-Garde is a critical concept based on the discursive, affective, and activist field of Laibach’s and NSK’s practices of the 1980s. Its original basis was an anti-modernist and eclectic combination of anachronistic totalitarian models of Socialist Realism, fascist, and Nazi art with avant-garde practices ranging from Malevich’s Suprematism to Duchamp’s ready-mades. A characteristic example of NSK’s appropriation of the neo-avant-gardes within a national culture is *Svoji k svojim: Irwin – Oho* (Birds of Feather), a 1985 series of paintings depicting live actions previously carried out by the group OHO (see Zinaić 139). The terms *retrogarda* (Retro-Garde) and *ret-roavanguardia* (Retro-Avantgarde) denote the reversal of the modernist concept of avant-garde. With their prefix retro, retro-garde and retro-avantgarde suggest an active, transgressive interest in the past and an intervention in the “symbolic capital” of memory, i.e., the effects of past traumas on the present and future. The retro-garde is a formation that takes up, appropriates, and problematizes cultural and political images and identities of the past from a contemporary perspective. The appropriation has the character of a cynical (Žižek 100–129) deconstruction or subversion of undeniable political truths.

Another case of transgression is the NSK state. When the Republic of Slovenia proclaimed independence on 25 June 1991, Slovenian society was constituted for the first time by an independent nation state. The situation of becoming a state spurred the NSK movement to initiate and implement complex projects dealing with the phenomenology of state and statehood. The notion of the state as an object, i.e., project, order, situation, event, and effect, attracted NSK and influenced its examination of the state existing in time rather than the territoriality of contemporary states: “In the year 1991 NSK has been re-defined from an Organisation to a State. A state in time, a state without territory and national borders, a sort of ‘spiritual, virtual state’” (NSKSTATE.COM).

The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia was accompanied by a brutal inter-ethnic struggle for the territories of the emerging nation states. Territorial struggles proved to be critical in most other post-socialist

states as well, especially in those that emerged from the disintegration of USSR. National-territorial, geographical, and symbolic fetishism was typical for the transition from real socialism to post-socialism. The response of the NSK movement to “territorial fetishism” was the construction of its fictional state (Vilić 9–18) that exists only in time.

The project began with the opening of the NSK embassy in Moscow in 1992, a kind of Suprematist metaphysical performance: the concept of the spatial determination of states was replaced by the locating of a state in time, outside of geographical space. Instead of the current geography of planetary space divided among states, NSK proposed “geography of time” (Čufer and IRWIN). Like most NSK concepts, the concept of geography of time was ambiguous and multi-referential. It oscillated between literal comprehensibility and conspiratorial fictionality. First, it was a reaction to the post-socialist state-forming territorialization of the ex-Yugoslav geographical and geopolitical space. Secondly, it reacted to the dematerialization of the state by transforming the state territory into a temporary neoliberal social relationship and state operations, symbolically marked by coats of arms, embassies, flags, passports, stamps, citizenship, army, or political rituals. These divergent examples illustrate the complexity of the production and post-production that the global administration of the symbolic potentials of the immaterial-temporal NSK state requires. Such systems and state instrumental functions became a productive medium of the group IRWIN and the NSK movement. They showed how the political and economic matter of global contemporaneity could be transformed into a fictional domain of artistic appropriation, re-examination, and problematization through projects that tested the “state” as a new artistic post-medium.

A comparison: OHO vs. NSK

The group OHO and the NSK movement were similar in that they both emerged in a dynamic relationship with the coexisting alternative culture and pursued a critique of the local and global cultural formations prevailing at the time. In the case of OHO, the alternative culture they identified with was the hippie culture of the 1960s and the youth movements; their background was also Slovenian-Yugoslav socialist culture and Western liberal and international culture during the Cold War. In the case of NSK, the alternative culture they identified with was punk and post-punk; in a broader sense, they drew on the culture

of late socialism, the transitional period, and Slovenian nation-state building. OHO unfolded its “revolutionary potential” within a soft, ecologically oriented, and esoterically organized alternative world of the youth, which resisted the promises of the society of abundance. NSK unfolded its “revolutionary potential” amidst intensifying antagonisms (local and global, political, economic, and cultural), and the aggressive audio-visual rhetoric of cynical punk.

The group OHO and the NSK movement presented complex organizations through which they became active carriers of culture and life. The group OHO constructed its metaphysical “OHO-Man,” which was a synthesis of the individual possibilities of the group members: “A characteristic of our group is that each of its members performs his or her role within a combined spectrum that ranges horizontally from rationalism to intuitionism and vertically from systematicity to sensibility, and I think that these different roles could even be expressed in percentage points for each member of the group” (Denegri and Tomić 8). The OHO-man is a construct of an imagined subject that reontologizes the unique possibilities of the individual members and establishes a collective subject that transcends bodily reality. In contrast, the NSK movement emerged from a network of alternative and independent art institutions such as Laibach (music), IRWIN (painting), Gledališče sester Scipion Nasice (Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre; theatre and performance), Novi kolektivizem (New Collectivism; design), Retrovision (video and television), and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy (theory and philosophy). While OHO projected a metaphysical subject, NSK projected an institutional network endowed with a proto-corporative character.

The group OHO and the NSK movement shared their fundamental critique and rejection of the artistic and aesthetic culture prevailing at the time. In the case of OHO, it was their rejection of the modalities of moderate socialist modernism (especially the aestheticism of the Ljubljana School of Graphic Arts) prevailing in Slovenian and Yugoslav self-management in the 1960s. NSK rejected the modalities of the same moderate modernist tradition that came to a deep crisis in the 1980s; it also rejected the eclectic international post-modernism of the transavantgarde and neo-expressionism.

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Med novo občutljivostjo in transgresijo: slovenske alternativne umetniške prakse – OHO in NSK

Ključne besede: umetnost in družba / slovenska umetnost / neoavantgarda / postavantgarda / retroavantgarda / konceptualna umetnost / politika / revolucija / OHO / Neue Slowenische Kunst

Članek primerja strateške pesniške in politične podobnosti oziroma razlike med konteksti neoavantgardne in retroavantgardne prakse v povezavi z estetskimi, umetniškimi in kulturnimi revolucijami. Sopostavim dva revolucionarna potenciala in učinka njenega udejanjanja: utopije in projekcije mednarodne revolucije, ki se nanašajo na »novo senzibilnost« in enotnost »umetnosti in življenja« (v letu 1968), ter več projektov in praks, ki spodkopavajo totalitarne sisteme, od punkovskega cinizma do nacionalnih revolucij leta 1989, ki so strmoglavile realsocializem v vzhodni in srednji Evropi. V primerjalni razpravi se osredotočam na dva konkretna primera v slovenski umetnosti in alternativni kulturi, pri čemer poudarjam položaj »eksperimentalne poezije«, »nove senzibilnosti« in »konceptualne umetnosti« skupine OHO, ki deluje med letoma 1966 in 1971, ter stališče »političnega cinizma« in »retro-avantgardne umetnosti« v gibanju Neue Slowenische Kunst, ustanovljenem leta 1984.

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